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ACADEMICS

GWU Students Travel to Cataloochee Valley to Study Behavior of Elk

BY OFFICE OF UNIVERSITY COMMUNICATIONS ON NOVEMBER 19, 2021



▲ From left, Kalyn Wilson, McKenzie Trantham, Kelsie Burke and Victoria Young had the opportunity to view elks in their natural habitat in the Cataloochee Valley of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Jay Zimmer's Animal Physiology Class Photographs Herd Rising from Bedding Ground

By Sarianna Miranda-Rosado, '24, Intern for Communications

BOILING SPRINGS, N.C.—The fall of the year is one of best times to study the behavior of elk, and recently students in Jay Zimmer's Animal Physiology class went to a perfect place to view them. Kalyn Wilson, McKenzie Trantham, Kelsie Burke and Victoria Young had the opportunity to view elks in their natural habitat. Starting at 5:20 a.m., the group traveled for about two and one-half hours to catch the herd rising from the bedding ground in the Cataloochee Valley of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

According to the Bryson City (N.C.) website, Cataloochee Valley is nestled along one of the most rugged mountains in the southeastern United States. Surrounded by 6,000-foot peaks, the area began as a farming community and quickly became a tourist destination. The elk population were eliminated by over-hunting, but 25 were reintroduced in 2001 and have grown to at least 150.



“We wanted to come in the fall to study the elk herd’s behavior,” Zimmer explained. “It’s at this time of the year that the bull elk gather up and defend a harem of cows. The dominant bull will bugle to deter competing bulls and often must chase them away.”

The group took pictures of the elk with telephoto lenses and cameras borrowed from the GWU Department of Communication, Art & Design. After making the photos, the group analyzed and charted the behavior they witnessed among the elk. To better understand the habits exhibited during their observations, the students learned about the ecology of the park before the trip, also studying other animals that have been reintroduced, including barn owls, red wolves, peregrine falcons, and river otters. Additionally, the students were introduced to the history of the area—stories of the Cherokee Indians, early settlers, the Trail of Tears, growing apples, and making moonshine.

Wilson shared her experience about the trip, stating, “We did plenty of research before and even made presentations for the class, so that when we got out into the field, we would be prepared for any kind of social interaction and behavior presented by the elk.”

She also gave some tips for viewing elk. “Get to the location super early, like before sunrise, because as soon as the sun is up, they’re more than likely going to be hidden in the trees,” she noted. “Have a good camera, because you never know how close or how far away from them you’ll be. And lastly, always give them the space they deserve. We were on their land and they were gracious enough to let us take pictures. You wouldn’t want to ruin that by getting too close for comfort.”



▲ Photo by Victoria Young



▲ Photo by McKenzie Trantham



▲ Photo by Kalyn Wilson



▲ Photo by Kelsie Burke

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